

## United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0905

October 19, 2005

The Honorable Richard Pombo  
2411 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Pombo:

As a member of the U.S. Senate's Armed Services Committee, our nation's defense and security must be, and is, among the very highest priorities. For decades, the eastern Gulf of Mexico has provided our country's Air Force, and more recently our Navy, with vital obstruction-free space for essential military testing and training.

Unfortunately, your proposal to expand drilling in the eastern Gulf undermines the long-standing agreement between the Department of Defense and the Department of the Interior that has allowed this critical testing and training space to remain open. That arrangement, first established by the Reagan Administration in 1983, gives the Air Force say over the sale of drilling leases in the eastern Gulf to protect U.S. military readiness from falling prey to oil-drilling interests.

Over the past 22 years, the government has reinforced this Reagan-administration agreement by respecting the Air Force's unique training needs.

In 2000, as new drilling closer to Florida was being considered, the Air Force reasserted its need to maintain this open space by establishing what's known as the Military Mission Line – a line at 86° 41" of longitude, east of which no drilling can take place. This line currently is about 230 miles off the coast of Tampa Bay – meaning your proposed 125-mile buffer would rob the military of air and sea space and would be a retreat for much of coastal Florida.

In 2003, after the Navy abandoned training in and around Vieques Island, Puerto Rico, it established a training system that uses critical air space and ranges off Florida, including in the eastern Gulf.

In an August 18, 2005 memo, the Air Force once again declared that "oil [ and ] gas production in the Eastern Gulf of Mexico is incompatible with our current and future test and training missions."

If you reject the facts that your drilling proposal won't drive down gas prices or recover enough oil to lessen our dependence on foreign sources, please consider that it would cut the Air Force's and Navy's available training space about in half. As we face continuing military missions abroad, I am reminded how vitally important this testing and training area is to our nation's security. We simply cannot undercut our military.

At my request, the Defense Department is reassessing its increased testing and training needs in the eastern Gulf; and, will be providing the Armed Services Committee its determination as early as next month. In the name of national security, we must take into consideration the Department's views, and the risks to readiness of our forces, before deciding legislation that could harm our nation's military capabilities.

I look forward to working with you to prohibit oil and gas activities in the Eastern Gulf Joint Training Complex.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Nelson". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Enclosures